

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Teleological view: ends and goods

“Every craft and every investigation, and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well described as that at which everything aims. However, there is an apparent difference among the ends aimed at....

Since there are many actions, crafts and sciences, the ends turn out to be many as well; for health is the end of medicine, a boat of boatbuilding, victory of generalship, and wealth of household management.

But some of these pursuits are subordinate to some one capacity; for instance, bridle making and every other science producing equipment for horses are subordinate to horsemanship, while this and every action in warfare are, in turn, subordinate to generalship, and in the same way other pursuits are subordinate to further ones. In all such cases, then, *the ends of the ruling sciences are more choiceworthy than all the ends subordinate to them, since the lower ends are also pursued for the sake of the higher.*” (EN Bk 1, 1094a1-18)

The Highest Good and Political Science

- The good is the ultimate end (*telos*) and knowledge of the good will help us to determine the best way of life.
 - “Suppose, then, that the things achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things, and that we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile. *Clearly, this end will be the good, that is to say, the best good.*”
- We need to understand the “best good” because “knowledge of this good also carries great weight for [determining the best] way of life; if we know it, we are more likely, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark.” (EN 1094a18-27)
- The “ruling science” is political science because “while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to acquire and preserve it for a people and for cities.” (1094b10)

What are your endoxa?

- Aristotle thinks that the knowledge of the good will help us determine what is best in life.
- But what does that mean?
- What do you want out of life?

What is commonly thought to be the highest good?

- “Since every sort of knowledge and decision pursues some good, what is the good that we say political science seeks? What, [in other words], is the highest of all the goods achievable in action?” (1095a15)
- “As far as name goes, most people virtually agree; for both the many and the cultivated call it happiness (*eudaimonia*), and they suppose that living well and doing well are the same as being happy. But they disagree about what happiness is, and the many do not give the same answer as the wise.” 1095a20
- The English word ‘happiness’ does not capture the Greek word ‘*Eudaimonia*’.
 - » ‘Eu’ literally means ‘good’ or ‘well’, and ‘daimonia’ means ‘spirit’.
 - » Another translation is ‘flourishing’

Possible Lives

- **What Eudaimonia is NOT:**
 - » **Life of wealth:** Can't be what makes life fulfilling because we only want it because of what it can buy.
 - » **Life of Pleasure:** Can't be what makes life fulfilling, since a life of pleasure seeking is only fit for beasts.
 - » **Political life:** the end is being well thought of. “too superficial to be what we are seeking for it seems to depend more on those who honor than on the one honored, whereas we intuitively believe that the good is something of our own and hard to take from us.”
1095b25
 - » **Life of Study (contemplation):** Not considered until Book 10 (*we're not covering*)
- **If happiness is not one of these things, what could happiness be?**
- **Happiness tied up in the excellent functioning of a human being.**


The Function Argument

- (1) If something has a function, its good depends on what its function is. (1097b24-29)**
- (2) Just as the sculptor and the craftsman have a function, and just as the parts of our bodies have functions, so does man himself. (1097b30-34)**

So: (3) The human good depends on the human function.

- (4) The human function must involve the exercise of a distinctive power or faculty, not shared by plants and animals, namely reason. (1098a1-5)**
- (5) If something has a function, its good is (a) to perform that function – not just to have the capacity to do so; and (b) to perform the function well, or with excellence. (1098a6-13)**

So: (6) The human good is excellent activity of the part of the soul that has reason – i.e. it is the "activity of the soul in accord with virtue [excellence], and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one." (1098a16-20)




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Examples:

- » **A good knife is one that functions well, i.e., cuts well**
 - » **A good heart is one that functions well, i.e., it pumps blood well.**
 - » **A good person is someone who functions well, i.e., lives life well.**
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Rational
soul: humans

Locomotive soul:
animals, humans

Nutritive soul: plants,
animals, humans

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Some worries

Premise 2: Does it follow from these other things having a function that human beings have a function?

Premise 4: Must the human function be distinctive? Why can't we share it with e.g. other animals?

Premise 5: (a) Why must something's good consist in its function being performed? (cf. the nuclear deterrent). And (b) Why must something's good be to perform its function well, rather than, say merely adequately? (cf. the vending machine)

- **Why should performing one's function well constitute a fulfilled life?**

- **What does Aristotle mean by the human good being the excellent activity of the part of the soul that has reason?**
- **What can the function of human beings be? It must be an activity in which only human beings engage.**
- **According to Aristotle, rational activity, "an active life of the element that has a rational principle," is the only activity peculiar to humans.**
- **Therefore, "the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle" (I.7).**
- **The function of human beings is to perform acts as reason dictates. "The function of the good man [is] the good and noble performance of these" (I.7).**
- **To be a good person = to fulfill the human function = to perform acts characterized by excellence = to perform acts of virtue ("over a complete life").**

EN Bk 2: Virtues of Character

Two Sorts of Virtue At the beginning of Book 2, Aristotle makes a **distinction between virtues of thought and virtues of character:**

- » “Virtue, then is of two sorts, virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character [i.e., of *ēthos*] results from habit [*ethos*]; hence its name ‘ethical’, slightly varied from ‘*ethos*’” (1103a15-19)

Definition of a virtue of character:

- » “**Virtue**, then, is a **state** that **decides**, **consisting in a mean**, the **mean relative to us**, which is defined by reference to **reason**, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency.” (1107a1-4)

Let’s look at some of these key ideas.

State (*hexis*)

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- Not a feeling, because they don't determine goodness or badness
- Not a disposition, which is only future-directed, and need not be exercised
- But a habit. Note that since emotions are so important to Aristotle, we seem to have to say that the habit must be one not just of acting, but of feeling as well.
 - » We acquire virtues like we acquire some skill. "For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions." (1103a33-1103b2)
 - » "That is why we must perform the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, then to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important." (1103b22-25)

Emotions/feelings

“every state of soul is naturally related to and about what every naturally makes it better or worse; and pleasures and pains make people base, from pursuing and avoiding the wrong ones, at the wrong me, in the wrong ways, or whatever other distinctions of that sort are needed in an account. These [bad effects of pleasure and pain] are the reason why people actually define the virtues as ways of being unaffected and undisturbed [by pleasures and pains]. They are wrong, however, because they speak of being unaffected without qualification, not of being unaffected in the right or wrong way, at the right or wrong time, and the added qualifications. We assume, then that virtue is the sort of state that does the best actions concerning pleasures and pains, and that vice is the contrary state.” (1104b20-27)

Decision (*prohairesis*)

- What lies behind each action
- A decision is the result of:
 1. A wish, i.e., a rational desire for some good as an end in itself (1111b26, 1113a15);
 2. Deliberation, i.e., systematic rational calculation about how to achieve an end (1112b15).

These result in

3. The decision, which is a desire to do something here and now, the action that deliberation has shown to be the action required to achieve the end. (1112b26, 1139a21-b5)

consisting in a mean

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Relations between Mean and Extreme States

- » “Among these three conditions, then, two are vices—one of excess, one of deficiency-and one, the mean is virtue. In a way, each of them is opposed to each of the others, since each extreme is contrary both to the intermediate condition and to the other extreme, while the intermediate is contrary to the extremes.” (1108b11-15)

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What does the “mean relative to us” mean?

- » “By the intermediate in the object in the object I mean what is equidistant from each extremity; this one and the same for all. But relative to us the intermediate is what is neither superfluous nor deficient; this is not one, and is not the same for all.

Mean relative to us

If, for instance, ten are many and two are few, we take six as intermediate in the object, since it excess [two and is exceeded [by ten] by an equal amount, [four]. This is what is intermediate by numerical proportion. But that is not how we must take the intermediate that is relative to us. For if ten pounds [of food], for instance, are a lot for someone to eat, and two pounds a little, it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six, since this might also be either a little or a lot for the person who is to take it—for Milo (or Michael Phelps) [the athlete] a little, but for the beginner in gymnastics a lot; and the same is true for running and wrestling.

In this way every scientific expert avoids excess and deficiency and seeks and chooses what is intermediate—but intermediate relative to us, not in the object.” (1106a-1106b7)

Virtue of character

“By virtue I mean virtue of character; for this is about feelings and actions, and these admit of excess, deficiency, and an intermediate condition. We can be afraid, for instance, or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, and in general have pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well. But having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue. Similarly, actions also admit of excess, deficiency, and an intermediate condition.” (1106b17-24)

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Reference to reason (practical reason)

Two different (though perhaps not competing) accounts of what Aristotle means by reason:

1. Hughes: dealing with complexity

- With habits alone, the students lack the ability to deal with the sorts of complex situations that arise in adult life
- It's easy to become confused when, for instance, two habitual responses seem to be in conflict (e.g. bravery and loyalty)
- It's only by being able to think about such situations that they will be able to respond appropriately: which is the role of practical wisdom.



2. Burnyeat: completing the process of upbringing

- First stage: The students know ‘the that’:
 - the facts about what is just and noble
 - they take pleasure in it
 - acquired by habituation
 - “the soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habits for noble joy and noble hatred, like earth which is to nourish the seed.” (1179b24-6)
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